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Preface:

I'm going to begin by saying that I'm not the first person this year to deliver a "Nevertheless, She Persisted" sermon. You may recognize this as the quote that gained popularity, if not near notoriety, following Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren's speech she attempted to give during the Jeff Sessions confirmation hearings. Warren wanted to read into the congressional record a letter that had been written by Coretta Scott King, the late widow of activist Martin Luther King, Jr. King's letter made powerful statements about the racist actions she had witnessed from Sessions earlier on in his career. But Warren was silenced during her reading, using an obscure Senate rule about how senators can and cannot talk about each other. A woman, reading another woman's testimony was silenced, in a predominantly male room. This sent shock waves throughout the country – and especially rang true in the stories of many women, and for people of color, and for men who have tried to make statements contrary to what those in power would want them to say.

Now as Mitch McConnell was called upon to comment on what happened in this exchange as Senate Majority leader, he said of Warren, "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted." This triad of statements

demonstrates a powerful pattern at work. And I don't think McConnell had any idea that his pithy speech would awaken such a dragon. But he articulated quite clearly exactly how those in power attempt to silence someone who refuses to be silenced. And the fact that she persisted in the face of power is what absolutely drives those who want someone to shut up crazy.

I dare say that this three-sentence story gets repeated often when it comes to explaining how the narrative of justice must fight to be heard. It is not a new story. We who try to live on the side of justice will be warned to quit talking nonsense. We will be given multiple explanations for why the world is the way it is. So if we are to persist, we will need many, many role models to help us out.

Today's story is a biblical story of persistence, the story of the woman at the well. In this story, it is her persistence in her encounter with Jesus that makes a difference. In fact, Jesus doesn't always look so great in this story. One might wonder why it wasn't scrubbed from the biblical narrative. And yet, it is a story of inclusion, and forgiveness, and reconciliation, and justice. It is a story in which persistence pays off. The courage she demonstrates in telling her own story to people who likely did not want to listen is why this narrative continues to be read – as far away as Ashland, Virginia, more than 21 centuries after it happened.

Chapter one – She was warned.

John 4:5-18

⁵ So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶ Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

⁷ A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." ⁸ (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)^[a] ¹⁰ Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." ¹¹ The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?" ¹² Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" ¹³ Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." ¹⁵ The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” ¹⁷The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; ¹⁸for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”

She was warned.

She was a Samaritan. She was a woman. She had either no husband or five husbands depending on how the story got told. In those days, those things would have stacked up against her having any conversation with any man, let alone with Jesus.

Who comes to the well at noon to draw water? Nobody. You get your water in the cool of the morning or the evening, not in the dead heat of the day. She was avoiding contact, most likely. *Who would she have to talk to anyway?* The people in town knew her story, and avoided her because of it. It was best not to run into those who would make the snide remark, or give her the cold shoulder. She could draw her water in peace without any trolling comments. She had been warned plenty of times to keep her mouth shut, and her private life private.

But there he was. A lone rabbi, a Jew, sitting there right where she needed to go. He probably wouldn't talk to her anyway. Maybe she could get in and out quickly - filling her water jar without disturbance.

But no, he wants to start a chat? And can you believe he started the conversation with a request that, to her, must have seemed rude and demanding? “Woman, give me a drink.” That kind of request can’t be good. She was going to have to be tough – talk back – resist him in case he was up to something. Oh gosh, then she finds out that what he’s up to is some theological conversation. Jews and Samaritans don’t do *that* either. It’s better not to get involved in that age-old argument. She asks him directly, “Don’t you know who I am?” I’m not of your tribe, she tells him. Trying as quickly as she can to get out of this conversation.

But even worse than knowing that she’s not a Jew, he knows something else about her. He describes exactly who she is. Here it comes, the condemnation, the bitter accusations - he knows. He knows about her marital situation – far more than what we know from what we read here.

She had been warned, over and over again not to tell her truth, not to drink from the living water of authenticity, but to keep drying up and coming back in the heat of the day hoping to quench her thirst for just the moment.

We too have lived these under these warnings. If you are a woman, know your place. If you don’t have the right kind of religion, know your place. If you are living in sin, know your place. If you are not part of the dominant culture or the political power

structure, know your place. If you have spoken up or spoken out for justice, sit down, shut up and remember your place.

Chapter 2 – She was given an explanation.

John 4:19-26

¹⁹The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. ²⁰Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you^[b] say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” ²¹Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. ²⁴God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” ²⁵The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” ²⁶Jesus said to her, “I am he,^[c] the one who is speaking to you.”

She was given an explanation.

The explanation can be worse than the warning. The new buzzword for this, in case you haven't heard, is "gas-lighting." It's the kind of explanation meant to make the person hearing it feel stupid or crazy. Honey, you should have followed the long-standing Senate rules. We cover up for each other here. How dare you presume that you can point out the mistakes of one of our own. It's all about getting corrected as a means of shifting blame. The person giving the explanation goes on the defensive. Whatever it is, it can't be my fault – so somehow it must be yours – and let me tell you how.

Now, in this story, I don't think Jesus' explanation is meant to leave her taking on some sort of blame – and yet he uses what could easily be interpreted as inflammatory language. Woman – believe me. You worship what you do not know. The TRUE worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. He takes on her gender, her culture, and her religion. How she actually heard him speaking kindly and convincingly in what he was saying is pretty amazing. Much more had to be going on in this story.

She knows about the Messiah. Her religion and his aren't as different as they are often made out to be. Instead of hearing these words and feeling stupid or crazy, she believes him. His warning and his explanation aren't meant to belittle or demean her. Rather, he speaks to her and she feels safe, known, and open to hearing his truth.

Too often the opposite occurs. Even mildly perceived attacks upon our character or our knowledge can make us defensive. Even when it's a random comment from someone I don't even know on Facebook, I can get my feelings hurt, and that's silly. And yet, I feel wired to that kind of sensitivity as someone who cares deeply about my relationships with other people. Because of my job, I have worked hard to minimize my reactions so I can clearly hear the other person even when their reactions are designed to wound me. It's not so easy to do. What made the woman at the well so open, so vulnerable, and so ready to embrace a new way of thinking is beyond me. Maybe Jesus was the ultimate therapist here, understanding her human projections and helping her re-write her own story in a more positive light. Maybe he understood that she needed to be known, not just by the rumors and assumptions, but by who she truly was. Maybe we all need that. Maybe we are all thirsty for that, as Jesus describes it.

If only we had more Jesus moments rather than more of the typical human moments when we feel wounded by another person's words, and give up, or quit trying to have our voice heard, or retreat into being the injured party. That's where we can learn from the woman at the well. We can borrow from her strength, and begin to see it in the same story, repeated over and over again. We were warned. We were given an explanation. What will we do next?

Chapter 3 – Nevertheless, She Persisted.

John 4:27-42

²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?” ²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, ²⁹ “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, ^[d] can he?” ³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.

³¹ Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, “Rabbi, eat something.” ³² But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” ³³ So the disciples said to one another, “Surely no one has brought him something to eat?” ³⁴ Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. ³⁵ Do you not say, ‘Four months more, then comes the harvest’? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. ³⁶ The reaper is already receiving ^[d] wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. ³⁷ For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ ³⁸ I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

³⁹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.” ⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. ⁴¹ And many more

believed because of his word. ⁴²They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Nevertheless, She Persisted.

She told the story. She did. The unnamed Samaritan woman with a reputation who met Jesus by her ancestors’ well told the story of her transformation, and people believed her. She became an evangelist, and “many Samaritans” came to see Jesus all because of her unrestrained enthusiasm and personal testimony. Thousands, perhaps millions more heard about or read Coretta Scott King’s letter because Elizabeth Warren refused to be silenced as she raised questions about justice and leadership. The message of Jesus got set on fire because this woman was not content to simply take him at his word. She talked back. She argued religion. She made Jesus stay in the community and keep teaching to see if his teaching was really real. It takes the audacity of good-hearted folks to keep the good news alive. And it especially takes the courage and persistence of those who are on the side of justice to broaden the scope of God’s love beyond the limits we try to place on it.

Too many want to crush the expansion of the good news to those they don’t think deserve it. And those who make it their purpose to keep the love of God in their own tight inner circle, interestingly can find themselves on the side of making it into a

much bigger deal than if they would have stopped pushing their own agenda in the first place. I secretly love it when that happens. Jesus might not have taken his story to Samaria. It was a Jewish story – or so he thought. He argued that point with her. The disciples were certainly not interested in continuing their ministry to the Samaritans. They even wondered how he would have accepted lunch in that town. And she made her town a hub of the good news. Jesus could have kept his story telling to the men alone. Certainly, most religious leaders of his day did. But he ventured a conversation with the woman who wasn't supposed to be at the well that day. He taught Mary and Martha. And it ended up being the women who took the good news from the tomb – he has risen!

The good news would be yesterday's news if not for the persistence of many, many people, women and men, telling their stories of healing and transformation. He knows me, really knows me, and yet, I am no longer afraid of being known because I know that Jesus loves me, the God of heaven loves, yes, me.

If you speak for justice,

If you tell the truth,

If you honor those rough outer edges of God's kingdom where all those unlikely people keep getting let in,

You will be warned. Someone will try to silence you.

You will be given an explanation. Someone will try to make you feel crazy.

Keep going anyway. Persist - my sisters. Take courage - my brothers.

That's how God is using us. The same three-sentence story will be our story of transformation as well. Amen.